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National police dog trials coming to Punta Gorda

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Punta Gorda is going to the dogs. In October, the city will play host to the 2012 United States Police Canine Association's National Field Trials, a week-long event that draws K-9 officers and their handlers from around the country to compete for the honor of top police dog.

The city last played host in 2000, and beat out Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis for this latest opportunity to hold the trials, which the Punta Gorda Police Department and the Charlotte County Sheriff's Office are co-hosting.

Punta Gorda Police Chief Albert "Butch" Arenal said the level of competition is intense, and agencies want their K-9 to be a top 10 dog that's recognized on a national level.

"I've seen handlers throwing up before because they get so nervous," Arenal said. "For this discipline, it's a nerve-wracking experience."

Over 100 dogs are expected to compete, according to Punta Gorda Police Department Capt. Jim Nichols, who helped to organize the event.

Nichols said he went to a USPCA board meeting last year and made his pitch for Punta Gorda to be the host city, using the sunshine and beaches



PHOTO PROVIDED BY PGPD

Officer Jonathan Mendel and K-9 Officer Jedi will represent the city in United States Police Canine Association's national field trials in October. Punta Gorda is playing host to the event, which is expected to draw competitors from around the nation.

as draws. The events will take place in Laishley, Gilchrist, Carmalita and South County parks, Nichols said, and everything will be open to the public.

The trials will also feature a demonstration night at Charlotte Sports Park, where all of the dogs and their handlers will get to show off at one

time. The previous demonstration drew over 7,000 spectators, according to Nichols.

Nichols said handlers and K-9s both go through hours of training in order to become certified, and the competition is an opportunity to

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show off their skills — and their bond — in front of an audience and their peers.

A former head K-9 trainer for the Sheriff's Office, and a past president of the USPCA, Nichols added that the competitions are highly competitive

and entertaining.

"It's a lot of fun, and we hope the public will come out and watch. It's very impressive to watch a dog climb a ladder," Nichols said.

The Punta Gorda Police Department will be represented by K-9 officer Jedi and Officer Jonathan Mendel. Jedi is a past winner but this will be the first competition for

Mendel, and Arenal jokingly said they under no pressure other than to bring home a top-10 finish.

But he's serious when it comes to showcasing the city as host of the event, and he thinks the business community will get a nice boost from the attendees and their families.

He's hoping the community embraces the event by hanging

banners, signs, and purchasing T-shirts, the proceeds of which go back into the event's funding. No tax dollars are being used, according to Arenal, because donors have stepped up to the plate to help bring the competition to Punta Gorda.

"We have worked very hard to keep everything near the city center, to keep people lodged in Punta Gorda," Arenal said.

"We want the visiting officers to support our local businesses and we want our businesses supporting the trials."

The complete schedule of events is still being finalized, but the trials are expected to take place Oct. 15-19 at various locations in Punta Gorda. For more information contact the PGPD at 941-639-4111.

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